



AAC Publications

Clarks Fork Canyon, The Chief, Yellow Wolf

Wyoming, Absaroka Range

JUST OFF the Chief Joseph Scenic Highway in northwest Wyoming is a section of the Clarks Fork Canyon of the Yellowstone River called the Box, which as far as I know was named by white-water boaters. In the Box is a 1,000', south-facing granite wall that we named the Chief. There are 10 routes on the Chief, most of which were quietly established ground-up in the early 2000s by a dedicated and tight-lipped crew of Bozeman climbers. Many of these are hard free routes, but a few still remain aid climbs and probably always will.

Yellow Wolf is the most recent free route on the wall and is also the first line on the north rim of the canyon that was established top down. The idea was to establish a repeatable, high-end free climb, so it seemed appropriate to approach it this way. I had been hunting for a proper free-climbing project close to home, and the Chief was the ideal location for such a project for me at the time.

At the beginning of 2016 I spent some time solo, scouting and establishing a cache of rope and gear at the top of the wall, which is quite hard to access. Once spring had sprung, I invited my friend and legendary Wyoming climber Greg Collins to the Clarks Fork for his first visit. I rolled out the red carpet and asked if he'd like to join me for the top-down rappel adventure to check out the line. With a substantial amount of rope, we rappelled, bolted anchors, and fixed lines while cleaning all the loose and scary chunks of rock from the wall.

Once the lines were fixed, the endless days of working the route began. We were so excited for the prospects, but at the beginning I had my doubts that it would ever go free. We worked hard that spring, using Mini-Traxion tactics to work it. Later my brother Sam and I planned a meet-up with Greg, who brought along his friend Brady Johnston. The four of us worked up the fixed lines and then rappelled the line together and added bolts to the upper pitches. We kept this team dynamic between the Greg and Brady's Driggs crew and the Bozeman contingent for the next year and a half—whoever had time would head down with whoever they could find to work the route. The names on the topo represent all the people that had a hand in scrubbing, chalking, working, and climbing on the route during its development. It was an amazing team effort establishing the line.

Toward the end of this two-year project, it was primarily Brady and me that were going for redpoint burns. At the end of October 2017, winter was knocking and Brady and I met up for one final go. On a very, very cold and windy day, during Brady's first go at the crux fourth pitch, he cut his finger badly due to the cold conditions. Now it was my turn—the cold temps were helpful for the friction and I managed to send the 40m pitch on my first try. Brady was a true partner, and he selflessly agreed to let me go for full send, which I managed to do that day. Yellow Wolf (1,000', IV 5.13+/14-) has one pitch of 5.13+ /14-, three pitches of mid-5.13, one 13-/12d, and five pitches at 11+ and below.

Yellow Wolf is named for the famous Native American warrior from the Nez Perce tribe who served under Chief Joseph. He was one of the few to share the story of the Nez Perce and their epic journey/battle trying to escape General Oliver Howard in the late summer of 1877. As the tribe fled for the Canadian border, they traveled through Clarks Fork Canyon, eluding General Howard and his troops. Because of this rich and sacred history, we who have been responsible for the climbing development of this canyon have always made an effort to keep the area a place of mystery and intrigue.

Yet so much effort and hardware went into this line that it would be a crime for it to remain a secret. In my opinion, it's hard, sustained granite free climbing at its finest, and I look forward to it being repeated. May you tread lightly and respect the ethos of this special place.

– Whit Magro



The Clarks Fork Canyon of the Yellowstone River in northwest Wyoming. Deep in the backcountry and long-guarded by tight-lipped locals and route developers, “the Clarky” features granite walls up to 1,000’ tall.



Brady Johnston working the crux pitch of Yellow Wolf (1,000’, IV 5.13+/14-) in the Clark’s Fork Canyon. After working the line over multiple seasons with Johnston, Whit Magro made the first ascent of the route in October 2017.

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